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Another man built his love the Taj Mahal; he built a kitchen: ceramic tile floors, highly polished cabinets and waxed butcher board counters, French copper pans hanging from the vaulted ceilings, pots of fresh herbs framing the windows, antique lithographs of fruits and vegetables diagramming their Latin parts, oak cases filled with cookbooks in several languages.

By day, he was stockbroker, but in his dreams he was the flushed plump owner of a Provençal inn, his wife swaddled in a heavy apron, beating sauces that flowed like satin ribbons. He had selected a wife carefully, after many meals at her mother's table. She brought a dowry of well-tested streudel and cheesecake recipes. She brought a lot of other goodies, too, but they were like placing candied violets and mimosa on the top of a lemon soufflé; very nice, but incidental to the essence.

One March morning, when the pastry dough was relaxing, the wife found some sneakers, a discarded pair of his sweat pants, an old college sweatshirt and ran around the block. The next day she wound her hair under a wool cap and ran around the block twice.

"How far do you think it is around this block?" she asked her husband at dinner.

"What?" he asked, listening to the meat sizzling on the platter.

"What is the distance around the block?"

"About a quarter of a mile, I guess. Why?"

"I ran it twice today."

"Why did you do that?" He actually put his fork down and faced her with great amusement.

"I don't know. Because it was there," she said lightly, and served a salad of endive and watercress.

The next day she bought a pair of running shoes, white nylon ones with suede tips and red vinyl wings stitched to the sides.

"I bought some running shoes today," she announced over a fragrant roast chicken.

"Whatever for?" he asked, sniffing the aroma of butter and rosemary.

"It's supposed to be important to wear good shoes when you run."

"Running," he snorted. "Another gimmick. A lot of those people shouldn't walk across the street without assistance." Gravy was racing down his chin.

Several days later she confessed, "I ran a mile today."

"You ran a mile?" He swirled the garnet wine around his goblet and stuck his long nose into the globe. "They are absolutely right."

"Yes?"

"Seventy-six is one of the great Beaujolais years. Ahhh." He sipped and sniffed. "May I ask why you are doing this, Molly?"

"It makes me feel good. My body was becoming like those terrible white mushrooms that come in the little plastic coffins in the supermarket."

"I think your body is like a golden apple turnover," he said, plunging his fork into his dessert.

Every day at noon, she tied on the white shoes with the red wings. Leaning on the authentic butcher's chopping block, she warmed up with the postures and stretches of her youth: pliés, battements, jetés.

She had spent her childhood stretched on a barre, peeking through the uneven rattan shades at the grimy rooftops of downtown Chicago. The sounds had been French and Russian: rich and musty as a cassoulet. The recipe was old and European: beauty out of pain. Her feet were a battlefield, the scars had healed as smooth and hard as jewels on her bent toes. The pianist's name was George, he was blonde and lean. As she pirouetted in wide diagonals across the wood floors, she caught fragments of his face, like the broken mirrors of a kaleidoscope.

When she was thirteen, her teacher announced that she could teach her no more. She must go to New York, to Mr. Balanchine.

"New York!" her father had sneered. "Mr. Balanchine!" He glared at the pale oval faces arranged around him like a carton of eggs. Who had confused this silly hobby with a life of dancing? What was the matter with these women? He was a student of history, among other things. Didn't they know that for centuries the only women who painted their faces and shaved under their arms were tarts and dancers? Were they aware that the Corps of the Imperial Ballet had been merely a whorehouse for the Russian aristocracy? For a long time, Molly stopped looking at the sky.

Today she did a deep reverence towards the Cuisinart accessories in their lucite throne. All that spring, Chopin echoed in her kitchen.

One day she took a left turn at the corner instead of a right one and ran three miles. I must be good at this, she thought, and bought a book

on running, placing it between Julia I and Julia II on the shelf. She traded the old movements of her childhood for new ones: sit-ups, flexed foot stretches, squats, hurdles.

"What are these?" her husband asked coldly one morning, picking something heavy off his chair. He was having cereal for the third time this week.

"My ankle weights."

"Don't you think this is getting out of hand?" he asked, thinking how he missed his eggs.

She would begin her run slowly, as the street went uphill. After a while it leveled off and she increased her pace, until finally the route slipped downhill and she flew home. Spring arrived that year as shyly as she did, approaching gradually, retreating into winter when it became too bold, until it gained confidence and flooded the streets with the heavy warmth of a good oven. She felt part of a glorious mythology, expecting to be changed into a flowering tree at any moment.

"A tree," her husband laughed. "More like a long fragrant loaf of French bread."

She was training for a mini-marathon, five miles for the benefit of a local charity.

"Five miles," he snorted. "You'll never make it. Pass the béarnaise, please."

One day, returning from her run, she saw her husband's car in the driveway. Oh, God, she thought. I guess I can make him an omelette. There was a small piece of Gruyère in the refrigerator.

"I've come home to run with you," he announced.

"Oh, no. I mean, I just finished running."

"I don't mean just today. You're absolutely right about this stuff. I'm getting soft; ever since I got you that pasta maker."

She watched in horror as he unpacked the car: two pairs of running shoes, one for asphalt, the other for indoor tracks, tiny nylon shorts with slits up the sides, armless T-shirts with rubberized numbers and perforations, sweatbands in red, white and blue and a navy velour suit for après.

"But how can you run with me? Don't you have to go to work?" she asked hopefully.

"Oh, well, we'll have to run some other time. Like in the morning."

"But I don't like to run in the morning, Charles. I like to run at noon."

"Don't you want to run with me, Molly? he asked.

She picked up some packages and walked into the house.

The first morning they ran together, she pulled a tendon in her

right ankle after one block. "Go ahead," she said, limping home. "I'll fix your breakfast."

It took a week for the ankle to heal. Books on running began to nudge the cookbooks off the shelves, runners' magazines appeared through the mail slot, weights and a treadmill crowded the sunny back bedroom where she put her yeast doughs to rise.

Whenever she ran with him, an enormous pressure would gather in her chest, pressing against her throat, so that she could not breath. She felt as if she would choke.

"Honest to God," he said. "I find it hard to believe you can run three miles. Every time we go out, you can't even make it three blocks."

Sometimes, she ran again at noon. Alone, she felt as if she had shed a heavy, scratchy overcoat. She could run for miles. One day she wandered farther than she had before and by the time she came to the top of her street, she was completely out of breath. She felt stunned with pain and started to cry. She could see Mike Taylor standing in front of his yellow house, watering his grass. She saw the curve of the green hose, the sharp needles of water; he was standing on a patch of lillies-of-the-valley.

"Hey, are you all right?" he asked, pushing the hose into the boxwood bushes.

"Yes, it's so silly, I just hurt so much . . . and I feel so sad." She started crying again.

Silently he took her hand and led her into the kitchen as if they were walking through a dark, unfamiliar tunnel. His hand was cold and slightly damp.

"Here," he said, bringing her a glass of cold water. "How far did you run?"

"I don't really know," she hiccuped. "At least five or six miles."

"Whew! I didn't know you could do anything like that."

"You're laughing at me."

"No, no, it's just. . . . Oh, brave new world, that has such women in it!" He stood by the sink, one hand on his lean hip, watching her drink. "Want to see something?"

"Sure." She followed him into the living room. "When did you get that piano?"

A grand piano, black and shiny as a limousine, sat in the middle of the room. "Few days ago. I like it," he said. "People don't move around easily if they own something like this." They both listened to the baby crying upstairs. "Look," he said, quietly. He lifted the keyboard lid. It was empty, the keys were missing. "It's being repaired. The action's missing—that's what they call it. The action. Thing can't make a sound. It's just a big empty box without it."

The baby cried out again. "I'd better check Maggie," he said.

"Where's Meg?" she asked suddenly.

"New York for the day."

Again, he took her hand and led her through the familiar maze of stairwells and cases and small rooms that she had been in a dozen times. But, this was, of course, the beginning of the magical mystery tour. It was like the spook house she had helped make at camp one summer. It was the same cabin they slept in every night, but excited by anticipation, and blindfolded, familiarity became exotica.

He changed the baby's diaper and turned her over. Molly patted her on her bottom. "I'd like to make more than pastry," she sighed.

She was surprised at the amount of lust his kiss released. She had assumed she kept hers folded neatly inside, like the cheese in a well-made omelette. She had known this man for six years, sat next to him at half a dozen dinner parties, given him two pecks on the cheek a year: one on his birthday, one on New Year's Eve. Once, in the darkness of someone's car on the way to a concert, he had placed a big hand on her knee and kept it there for the entire trip.

"I'm awfully smelly," she tried.

He sniffed. "You are. You smell like a jock."

"Maybe I should take a shower." After running, her thighs and ass were flushed the light red of early tomatoes.

"No. Don't do anything that might make you change your mind."

"Mike . . ."

"I like you like this, Molly. Honest."

They pulled back the neat monogrammed spread from Margaret's and his bed. "Ummm, my piece of pie," he breathed, burrowing into her.

"What did you call me?"

"It's an expression, Molly."

"Never mind," she sighed. "Go ahead."

Afterwards, he asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, please." She dressed in his robe and threw her running clothes into the dryer.

"Is instant okay?"

"Of course." She thought of the elaborate international machinery required for making a cup of coffee in her house: whirling German grinders, shiny Italian steam machines. And coffee beans as soft and dark as an African night. "Instant romance, instant coffee," she sang.

The mailman shoved letters into the basket on the front porch. "Morning, Mr. Taylor, Mrs. Taylor," he shouted through the open window to the backs of their heads.

"Kitchen adultery," Mike smiled.

* * *

The day of the marathon was crisp and sunny. "Great day for a picnic," her husband sighed.

In the crowd at the starting line, she thought she saw Mike, bending over, double-knotting his big blue shoes. When had he started running? Molly wondered. She looked at her husband, who was unwrapping his Gatorade chewing gum, a thirst quencher. Then she crossed her legs, and bending from the waist, touched her forehead to her knees.

The first quarter mile, she ran beside Charles, listening to the heavy slap of his feet next to hers, his forced breathing. The pressure in her chest started to build again, filling her ears. Tears popped into her eyes. It was mine, it was just mine, mine alone, she thought. And you couldn't let me have it. "You wouldn't let me fly alone," she whispered between her teeth to her amazed husband.

Mine, mine, mine, she thought, and suddenly, the pressure subsided; she felt as light as whipped egg whites. Her rhythm picked up and she pranced down the road. She turned around once to see his red face behind her.

"Molly, come back," he shouted. "You can't do this."

"I'm sorry," she sang and took off. With a series of long smooth strides, she overtook a perspired Mike.

"Molly," he called, stretching out his hand.

She waved without even turning around. What was the matter with men these days? They were like tea sandwiches that had sat around in the sun too long: dried and curling on the edges, soggy in the middle.

At the finish line, someone took her picture for the local paper; she was the first woman to complete the run. Panting, Molly bent over heavily, a sack, the cavities in the back of her head throbbing, the tips of her hair brushing the ground. She listened to what she assumed to be the sound of her heart beating in her ears. When she lifted her head, she realized it was applause.

Local merchants and acquaintances gave her congratulatory pats in various places. A woman handed her a plastic cup of lukewarm water and a paper towel for her face. There were prizes: a pewter mug needing inscription, a gift certificate from the new sporting goods store in the shopping center. The local bakery had donated a gigantic iced cookie in the form of a shoe.

Minutes went by; she waited nervously for her husband. She watched them disassemble the speaker's table and roll up the broken victory ribbon. She saw Mike leave, his arm around Meg, Maggie balanced on one boney shoulder. She started walking back.

There was a row of air mattresses set up near the first aid station. One of the attendants took her elbow and whispered in her ear, "That man over there . . . your father . . . husband? Well, he's in no condition to run five miles."

Molly looked at Charles' big head, his rumpled expensive running clothes, one plump arm, like a sausage, wrapped across his forehead.

"Lady, does the man belong to you?" the attendant repeated.

She nodded and turned and walked slowly towards Charles.